

Contracting for Object Conservation Treatment

The National Park Service regularly contracts for object conservation services. Services include conservation treatment of individual museum objects, collections, historic structures, and various types of collection and condition surveys. The few conservators in the NPS cannot address all of the object treatment and survey needs of the parks. This situation necessitates contracting for professional conservation services. The majority of contracts are developed, issued, and monitored by park and regional staff. The challenge of conservation contracting is:

- to develop an unambiguous statement of work,
- to find and select a qualified conservator,
- to understand the technical approach in the language of a treatment proposal,
- to monitor the work while in progress, and
- to determine whether some standard of quality has been achieved.

It is important to understand these steps because conservation treatment can result in a permanent change in the object. This article explores some of the problems and issues of contracting for conservation services and provides some suggestions on how to become knowledgeable about and control the process. The mechanics of the federal contracting procedures will not be discussed. Although the article is written primarily for NPS staff it is applicable for government agencies or individuals hiring a conservator.

Developing the Scope of Work

The contract scope of work is a written description of what the contractor is required to do, conditions under which the work must be conducted, how the work will be assessed, and goals to be achieved. Standard scopes of work for conservation surveys and object treatment are available from NPS regional Curators, NPS Museum Management Program office in Washington, and Harpers Ferry Center–Conservation. These standard scopes of work were written to speed up developing contracts and ensure critical elements are not forgotten.

Common mistakes in writing a scope of work involve using long sentences and paragraphs, abstract, vague or ambiguous language, and including unrelated materials. The objective is to write clearly, use exact descriptions, and avoid misunderstandings before and during the contract.

Finding and Selecting Qualified Conservators

How can you locate a professional conservator to bid on and complete the project? A list of potential conservators can be developed by consulting other park curatorial staff, the regional curator, calling local museums or historical societies, the American Institute for Conservation in Washington DC or calling Harpers Ferry Center–Conservation for recommendations. Conservators usually specialize in a particular type of object such as archeological and ethnographic materials, paper and photographs, textiles, and paintings. Conservators are not evenly spread over the U.S. so do not be discouraged if potential contractors have to travel a great distance to examine, survey, and treat objects. The goal is to find a conservator who has experience treating the type of objects you have or have conducted surveys. Selecting the right conservator requires evaluating qualifications. Does the individual have the education and experience for the project? The more time spent gathering information and understanding qualifications, calling previous clients about past performance on similar projects, and reading writing samples, the better the match between the conservator and the project. Unfortunately the selection process is time consuming and people are often hesitant about asking pointed questions and following up on references.

Treatment Proposal

After the contract has been issued the next step is for the conservator to examine the object and submit a treatment proposal or plan for written approval. The treatment proposal is a detailed statement of what and how the work is to be accomplished, and it serves as the basis of com-

munication and discussion between the conservator and the client. The plan must include:

- Report of examination, i.e., purpose of examination, identification, dates, maker/origin or scientific classification, accession or identifying numbers, measurements
- Materials to be used
- Time estimate
- Cost estimate
- Objectives and limitations of the proposed treatment
- Risks and benefits
- General description of the materials to be used
- Alternatives to the proposed treatment, if and when appropriate
- A statement that information revealed during treatment may require minor variations from the approved plan

It is critical to understand the treatment proposal because it details changes that will be made to the object. The submission of the treatment proposal presents the opportunity to discuss questions, reservations, or alterations with the conservator prior to commencing work. If the proposal presents issues, ideas, or terms that you don't understand park staff can call one of the NPS conservators for assistance or consider having an NPS conservator act as a technical representative to monitor the contract. Once the treatment proposal is approved and signed the conservator will proceed with the work. If contracting for collection or condition surveys the treatment proposal is not submitted, but the management goals of the work should be clearly identified

Contract Monitoring

When work begins it is important to monitor the contract's progress until the project is complete. Conservators are required under the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice to contact the client if there is any substantial change in the treatment proposal, but adding a monitoring element to the contract allows a greater degree of control of the process. Appropriate monitoring depends upon the complexity and scope of the contract. Two methods of monitoring are inspection, a visit to the conservator's studio to view the work in progress, or by submitting written progress reports.

The goal of contract monitoring is to ensure the contract is being performed properly

and problems are identified during the performance period instead of waiting until the project is complete.

Determining Quality and Performance

Quality standards have yet to be developed for object conservation treatment. Currently the measure of performance is that the contract was completed on time, on or under budget, there is some cosmetic or physical difference in the object, and a written report of treatment with photographs is submitted. The final treatment report should discuss not only any variations from the treatment proposal but also results of any analysis and recommendations for subsequent care either on exhibit or in storage. Conservation contracting is a process. Understanding and controlling the process is critical, because object treatment may change the way the object is perceived and interpreted by staff, researchers, and the public. Subtle changes in appearance such as color or gloss can result in changes in the interpretation of age or value. Of even greater importance in object treatment is loss of information that may reside in damage, deposits, wear, or other clues to the history of an object.

Contracting for conservation services is a common way to accomplish the variety of preservation projects facing NPS staff. Being knowledgeable and conversant about the contracting process and truly understanding the importance, historic value, and use of the object results in preservation of the unique qualities of the objects in our care.

Suggested Readings

The American Institute for Conservation developed the *Commentaries to the Guidelines for Practice* which defines accepted practice for the conservation profession and provides recommendations that assist in the pursuit of ethical practice. The commentaries are available online at <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/aic/pubs/comment.html>

National Park Service. 1990. *Museum Handbook* Part I, Chapter 3: Museum Objects Preservation: Getting Started and Chapter 8: Museum Object Conservation Treatment.

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